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ABSTRACT

This document reviews the progress of the Employment Training (ET) initiative for employed adults in Great Britain. The document begins by explaining the changing context in which the project is operating, which includes a downgrading of the alternatives to ET, increased participation in ET, and increased employer involvement in ET. The response of colleges to ET is reviewed, including an early lack of response in the area of curriculum development. The initial assessment process of individuals participating in ET is reviewed, and priorities are suggested for training agents, who do the assessments. The need for quality control over the delivery of training and the importance of providing equal opportunities, particularly for blacks and for men and women who desire occupations nontraditional for their sex, are outlined. Staff and institutional development are discussed. Trainee characteristics and project costs are covered, and several preliminary conclusions are reached about the ET project in general. The following conclusions are listed: (1) ET has exposed many issues; (2) ET has provided some stimulus for curriculum and institutional development; (3) further work is needed in staff development; (4) ET needs enlarged scope to deal with strategic skill shortages; (5) more time and funds are needed to address basic and special needs; (6) ET is underfunded in crucial areas; and (7) quality assurance in curriculum is an urgent priority. (CML)

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EMPLOYMENT TRAINING

JUNE 1989

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In this, the second FEU bulletin on the Training Agency's Employment Training (ET) initiative for the adult employed, progress is reviewed and some early conclusions are drawn. The initiative is still in its early days and a full evaluation would be premature. In addition, the context is changing rapidly for colleges and for the unemployed themselves. Nevertheless, this review should provide useful material for discussion for Training Agents, Training Managers and providers of directed and practical training.

The purpose of the bulletin is to note the views of those participating in the programme as providers of training. The programme is changing and developing: as this was being written the Minister announced changes in the fee structure and in the Action Plan. Amid such rapid development a clear estimation of quality is difficult to make. The evidence was gathered by Martin Johnson (FEU development officer) in a series of seminars conducted early in 1989. The evidence therefore is not exhaustive, nor the method flawless. Nevertheless, it is hoped that a number of issues are flagged up which merit discussion. A second purpose of the seminars was to identify ET activity for more thorough case study. Some venues for study have been selected and are referred to in this bulletin; others will be identified later. The case study bulletin will be published later this year.

BACKGROUND

The changing context

Unemployment is currently falling. This, together with wide regional variations in the level of unemployment, makes it difficult to generalise about ET. However, there is no doubt that the context of benefits and training that unemployed people experience is undergoing fundamental change. Under new regulations which require claimants to be actively seeking work, the feeling, if not the actuality, of compulsion in relation to ET comes closer. Further pressure is exerted through inconsistent interpretation of the 21 hour rule which

enables claimants to undertake part-time study while seeking work (see *FEU Guidance Notes - No. 13: The 21 Hour Rule*, FEU, 1988). There is considerable evidence that this option, which is a legitimate outcome of Restart interviews, is being actively discouraged. In addition, the White Paper *Employment for the 1990s* and the creation of Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs) will lead to significant change in the management of government-led training programmes. The net effect of these changes in the benefits and training context for the long-term unemployed may be to:

- downgrade the alternatives to ET;
- increase participation in ET;
- increase the involvement of employers in ET.

The college response

In the recent NATFHE analysis (March 1989) of the impact of ET on colleges, it was clear that:

- a large majority of colleges are involved in ET;
- relatively few are contracted as Training Agents (TAs) or Training Managers (TMs);
- there are few authorities opposed to *any* involvement in ET;
- of these few, all but two have colleges providing directed training (sub-contracted by Training Managers).

Another significant fact for colleges is the extent of their dependence on funding from the Training Agency, which currently stands at £140 million per annum for all schemes. Put another way, this is the equivalent of a third of a million pounds per college, or about twenty full-time staff.

Curriculum and ET

A common reaction to our enquiries about progress was that, in the early days of ET, curriculum issues are not being addressed as a priority. Other issues dominate, including administrative tasks and setting up or adapting an infrastructure. An early observation might be that, although there are problems with the dispersal of responsibility for the curriculum, evidence of good practice is beginning to emerge, especially among the providers of directed training. This evidence is referred to later in this bulletin.

EMERGENT ISSUES

'ET is a rod to beat colleges with to make them become more flexible' - Training Manager, West Country.

Initial assessment

In ET, the Training Agent's role is mainly diagnosis and assessment. Advice given is independent and objective. FEU would wish to endorse this principle (i.e. the separation of guidance and provision). However, it was notable in our survey that many of the problems occurring in the programme related to the development of these essentially new guidance agencies. These included:

- lack of availability of suitable staff;
- dominance of a careers service ethic;
- lack of time to address fundamental problems of basic and special educational needs;
- little continued monitoring of trainees once passed on to the Training Manager.

In some areas, existing basic and special education services are seriously overburdened, and in areas of low unemployment referrals are dominated by trainees with learning difficulties which cannot be addressed within the planned scope of the ET programme. Some personal action plans are seen as 'unrealistic' by providers of training and tensions are apparent between trainees' perceptions of their own needs and labour market requirements. Such a tension is inevitable between student-centred guidance and programmes designed to meet skill shortages. Resolution may lie in the emerging realism of trainees' expectations illustrated elsewhere in this bulletin by the clear preference for employment-related training.

Although at this early stage our observations seemed somewhat inconsistent, some patterns emerged, along with some evidence of good practice. For example, trainees are expressing preferences for clear employment-related training rather than for project work or other work experience. It is therefore the trainer's responsibility to adjust this preference towards a notion of portable skills rather than narrow job-related requirements. In some TAs, careful work has been done to establish objectives and performance criteria, for example the offer of a choice of TMs to all trainees at the County of Avon Training Agency (which will be the subject of a case study in a future bulletin). In another TA, in Cambridgeshire, diversification has led to a commercial offer of psychometric testing as a service to local industry. (The Training Agency has published *Assessment through Psychological Testing - A Guide for Training Agents* April 1989.)

Among early conclusions might be sympathy with the common frustation felt by many TAs when action plans taking account of trainee and labour market needs and the scale and scope of the programme are rejected by providers and planners of training.

The most urgent skill shortages are those which are unlikely to be met by short-term programmes. ET can barely touch these strategic problems.

Priorities for TAs might be:

- training programmes for TA staff in working with adults, diagnostic techniques and the assessment of prior learning;

- further boost for basic and special education from the Training Agency itself;
- strategies for TAs to retain ownership and responsibility for personal action plans after trainees are referred to TMs and incentives;
- development of strategy to ensure dynamic partnerships between TAs and TMs, for examples by offering fees for joint review of action plans;
- dissemination of good practice.

Design

The advent of ET is both timely and problematical. It is timely as it is providing a stimulus to:

- the individualisation of the curriculum;
- the development of enterprise in colleges;
- cross-college approaches to the curriculum.

If and when volume increases, tailor-made programmes will develop more rapidly. There are already good examples of these, though where infill is the dominant mode, many report a reluctance to accept trainees on systems analysis, construction, engineering and higher secretarial courses. Reasons include the low skill base of many trainees and the relatively short ET programme compared with alternative vocational training routes. The fear of employer-dominated TECs and narrow job-related outcomes could more positively be diverted into a productive dialogue between providers of training and employers, as indeed the TEC prospectus suggests.

Delivery: quality control

The Training Agency will be reviewing TA and TM contracts and judging performance against the criteria set out in the prospectus. At the time of writing there is little evidence of active quality management by the Training Agency, although the incentive provided by annual recontracting will keep TA/TMs on their toes. The ROTA (Review of Training Arrangements) which will accompany the recontracting process involves visits by Training Agency staff to TAs and TMs who will eventually develop a broader advisory, consultancy and problem-solving role. Accredited Training Centres also provide staff development opportunities particularly directed towards qualifications as trainers. However, at present, little control is exerted over curriculum delivery in TMs and providers of directed training, indeed many assert that targets set are actually impossible. Evidence of 'sink or swim' infill tactics abounds. Individual plans must be accompanied by personal guidance and support if they are to be carried out effectively. Guidance/counselling/tutorial services are rarely available on a sufficient scale.

In general, the inescapable conclusion at present is that the fragmentation of responsibility for the curriculum is a problem. Guidance, placement and delivery are usually, in ET, the responsibility of separate contractors or sub-contractors, and a stronger dialogue between them, and incentives to achieve this, are essential to ensure the quality product which is the aim of the programme.

Equal opportunities

'ET is not a great leveller' - Training Manager, London

Equal opportunities issues are particularly important in a programme aimed at the long-term unemployed, a group in which ethnic minorities are overrepresented. In addition, a definition of long-term unemployed which excludes many women who are unwaged in the long-term is clearly unsatisfactory. Thus many among our consulted groups noted that the promotion of ET should be more equal opportunities sensitive, particularly by removing the stereotyping of jobs as women's or men's and the positive promotion of opportunities for black people. It was also generally felt that, although open access to the scheme favoured women, it should be made more available to the unwaged. Opportunities for this via part-time ET should be made available to more groups than single parents, e.g women returners.

Assessment

There are difficulties associated with the lack of development of competence statements, inexperience in assessment of competence and shortage of work experience placements in which realistic assessment can occur.

On the other hand:

- ET has proved a stimulus to the development of the National Record of Vocational Achievement (NROVA);
- the need for work experience has stimulated enterprising responses in some Training Managers who are now providing servicing units for industry or employment placement services both for commercial gain and to provide work experience for trainees.

The response of a Cambridgeshire College will be a case study in the next bulletin.

The appointment of Design, Accreditation and Certification Advisers (DACAs) by the Training Agency may help to alleviate these problems. However, at present these advisers' roles are restricted to advising Training Managers. This could usefully be extended to Training Agents and even to providers of directed training, thus creating a useful partnership in the development of familiarity with training for, and the definition of, competences which might assist all participants in ET and, indirectly, the broader objectives of NCVQ relating

to the acceptance of competence and the qualifications framework.

A priority must be *training for assessment of competence*

Staff and institutional development

'We have fewer problems with trainees than with teachers' – Training Agent, London

There are urgent staff development requirements in all parts of ET. In particular, emphasis should be placed on:

- teaching adults;
- the individualisation of the curriculum;
- cross-college teamwork;
- tutorial support.

There was evidence in our consultations, however, of the stimulus that ET can provide. For example, many staff are developing roles as consultants and moderators on behalf of TMs in the evaluation of directed and practical training.

Reports from TMs suggest that responsiveness and adaptability in colleges is most likely to be found outside the conventional structure in, for example, development units, YTS units, basic education cross-college units or adult training networks. However, ET has generally stimulated cross-college co-operation.

There is underdeveloped potential in adult education services outside FE college. While many have mainly non-vocational programmes, since the mid-1970s, most services have developed capacity in relation to some vocational training, particularly in respect of basic and employability skills. *FE colleges should form partnerships with adult education services for the delivery of ET.*

OTHER ISSUES

Trainee issues

ET's particular clients, the long-term unemployed, have a number of characteristics that need to be borne in mind:

- they are likely to resent what is perceived as compulsion;
- they are particularly interested in relevance;
- they may be hostile to traditional provision.

Accordingly, delivery of training must pay regard to negotiation of style and content, support and guidance for trainees, special attention to 'difficult' customers (there is much evidence of rejection) and the importance of the relevance of training (not necessarily in terms of narrow job-related requirements). This client group, new to many colleges, *should not be marginalised yet again*, as, for many, that has been their lifetime's experience.

Cost issues

Cost issues particularly affecting the delivery of a quality curriculum include:

- Time and money for corrective work in basic and special needs areas are insufficient.
- Key support in guidance for trainees needs to be separately costed and paid for.
- The scope and duration of the programme needs to be enlarged if it is to meet key skill shortages.

A final ambivalent note on cost issues is provided by an LEA-based Training Manager: 'It's just as well the public sector is involved in ET, as, to make it work, someone has to lose money, and it can only be us!' There is strong evidence of heavy subsidy from many LEAs, a subsidy offered not to underwrite inefficiency but *to improve quality*. While it is generally true that many private providers offer quality training, it is generally in low-cost areas of limited scope, except in the case of a very few large organisations. *ET needs the public sector.*

CONCLUSIONS

- ET has successfully exposed a large number of issues.
- It has provided some stimulus for curriculum and institutional development.
- Further work is needed on staff development.
- The programme needs enlarged scope to deal with strategic skill shortages.
- More time and funds are needed to address basic and special needs.
- The programme is underfunded in crucial areas.
- Quality assurance in curriculum in an urgent priority.

Finally, FEU would wish to reiterate its original welcome (*Employment Training* Bulletin No. 1) and awaits responses to this bulletin from the Training Agency, from ET Agents and Managers, from providers of directed and practical training and others. Please comment to Martin Johnson, FEU, 2 Orange Street, London WC2H 7WE (telephone 01-321 0433). For details of the availability of further copies of this bulletin and other FEU publications, please contact the FEU Information Centre at the same address.

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